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ABSTRACT

Close to 250,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union have arrived in the United States since the early 1970s. In recent years, former Soviets have been the largest refugee population to enter the United States. These immigrants are generally well-equipped for adjusting to American life. They are skilled, educated, and possess urban experience. Because they enjoy refugee status, they are eligible for a variety of resettlement services. In addition, they frequently arrive as intact families. Nevertheless, some families find it difficult to adapt to the United States. Problems they face include the dependency of the young and the old, reversals of provider/recipient roles, status loss, and generational differences in religious identity. Teachers, resettlement workers, and other authority figures are often frustrated by the behavior of Russian Jews, who are used to dealing with authority figures in the Russian style, which placed a premium on influence and negotiation. Students frequently find that the lack of English skills requires them to repeat subject content they have already mastered because they are not able to demonstrate mastery. Precisely because so many Russian Jews do adapt rapidly, those who do not tend to regard their difficulties as the result of personal failure. Some suggestions are given for teachers working with Jewish immigrants. (Contains 62 references.) (SLD)

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JEWS FROM THE FORMER U.S.S.R. IN THE UNITED STATES

BY STEVEN J. GOLD AND MIA TUAN

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Jews from the Former U.S.S.R. in the United States

by Steven J. Gold and Mia Tuan

Introduction

Close to 250,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union have arrived in the United States as refugees since the early 1970s (HIAS 1992). This migration has arrived in two distinct flows. The first group, which entered from about 1972 to 1986, came as refugees from a functioning and highly restrictive communist nation. Since about 1986 — the beginning of the glasnost era — thousands more have exited a society marked by increases in both freedom and social disorganization. In recent years, former Soviets have been the largest refugee population to enter the United States. (ORR 1991: Fig 1).[1] Most have been Jews from Russia and Ukraine and other republics; there also have been thousands of Armenians and Pentecostalists.

The Jewish exodus represents the most recent flow of European Jews to the United States — a group that has migrated to this country since the 1600s (Glazer and Moynihan 1963: 138). While the majority of American Jews can trace their origins to the same regions of Eastern Europe that spawned the Soviets, in many ways this recent group is unique among Jewish immigrations. Russian and Ukrainian Jews are notable because of their high levels of education, the fact that they have lived under communism for generations and the many resettlement services they receive upon arrival in the United States.

Motives for Immigration

Because they are educated, white Europeans who are exiting a relatively peaceful part of the world, Jews from the former Soviet Union may seem to have little reason to flee from their homeland. However, the historical and contemporary experience of Russian Jews gives them ample reason to exit while the opportunity is available.

From the time of the tzars, through the pogroms in the 1880s, to Stalin's purges, the Nazi invasion and until the present, Russian Jews have been persecuted, massacred, marginalized and driven out. During each period of turmoil — from the 18th century until today — Jews have found themselves used as scapegoats for a wide variety of social problems. Violent, government-sanctioned reigns of terror, known as pogroms, have often followed. Nevertheless, Russian Jews have survived. By the 1960s, they were perhaps the most highly educated and urbanized of all nationalities in the U.S.S.R. Consequently, Jews have a long and complex history in the Soviet Union and hold mixed feelings toward the country that has provided them with both suffering and opportunity.

The migration of Russian Jews to the United States can be traced to the mid-19th century when they were restricted to particular geographical regions known as "the pale of settlement," excluded from all but a few fields of economic endeavor and subjected to violent attacks and life-long conscription. Such conditions caused millions of Jews to leave Russia and Eastern Europe.

In an attempt to improve their chances for survival, many of those who stayed on supported movements for social reform, including the Russian Revolution. Their involvement was significant. "Without the Jewish brain power their revolution would have failed. . . . At the end of Lenin's life most members of the Politburo were Jewish by origin though not, of course, by faith." (Andreski 1979: 153). Despite these contributions, Jews soon found their support of communism betrayed. By the 1920s, the Communists banned Jewish religious study and practice, prevented Jews from maintaining links with relatives and religious communities abroad, and encouraged Jews' resettlement from the European republics where most lived to Birobidzhan — a desolate "Jewish homeland" on the Manchurian border.

From 1937 to 1974, the number of Jewish deputies in the Supreme Soviet was reduced from 47 to 6 (Simon 1985: 8). Stalin's purges — from the 1920s to the "Doctor's Plot" and Crimean Affair of the post-World War II era — included disproportionate numbers of Jewish victims (Chesler 1974). "After World War II, Stalin climaxed his anti-Jewish campaigns by arresting and executing the nation's twenty-four leading Yiddish writers" (Orleck 1987: 283). It has only been since the fall of communism that Russians have officially acknowledged that Jews suffered more at the hands of Nazi occupiers than other Soviet citizens.

While denying Jews the right to practice their religious traditions — and thus mandating assimilation — the Soviet system nevertheless institutionalized outsider status by recording Jewish citizens' nationality as "Jew" on passports regardless of their place of residency or birth. Further, despite the Soviet system's dislike of Jews and its refusal to

grant them Russian nationality, the group's ability to emigrate or even travel abroad was strongly limited for political reasons until the late 1980s.

The Soviet system seldom gave credit to the role played by Jews in its inception. In contrast, anti-communist nationalist groups — which have gained strength since glasnost — have long remembered and overstated the Jews' role in the Revolution to fan the fires of anti-Semitism. For example, the Russian Nationalist Party recently published a manifesto featuring its 75 slogans. Of these, 52 were explicitly anti-Semitic or anti-Zionist (Gitelman 1992).

The stability of the post-WWII era brought little improvement in the status of Russian Jews. Anti-Zionism, a major plank in Soviet foreign policy since the 1960s, had especially dire consequences. Articles condemning Israel appeared with increasing frequency in the official Soviet media after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and thus gave government sanction to anti-Semitic attacks. "Getting the hint," ambitious officials would carry out personal projects of harassing, demoting or refusing to hire Jews as a means of currying favor with superiors. An emigre from Odessa described the rampant anti-Semitism in Kiev, Ukraine, during the 1970s:

> *When I came to Kiev, I took a bus usually from railway station or from airport. And I told myself, "How long will it take before I hear something about Jews?" And usually, it took 15 or 20 minutes and I would hear something already. These anti-Semitic feelings and thoughts, it's first place for them. Their anti-Semitic feelings and anti-Semitic conversations and everything, for them it's problem No. 1.*

The new openness of the former U.S.S.R. has permitted Russian Jews to freely engage in a variety of religious and cultural activities for the first time in 70 years. Further, since 1988, a half a million Jews have been able to leave for Israel and the United States. However, as Communist Party control of ideology has been replaced by freedom of expression, anti-Semites have also become increasingly open, active and virulent.

The current climate in the former U.S.S.R. — one characterized by impending economic crisis, social disorder, a revival of intolerant churches and the rise of ultra-nationalism — appears to be a textbook example of a setting ripe for anti-Semitic outbreaks (Gitelman 1992). Accordingly, many Russian Jews still hope to leave for the United States, Israel or other Western nations.

CHARACTERISTICS OF JEWISH REFUGEES FROM THE FORMER U.S.S.R.

Jews from the former Soviet Union are well-equipped for the task of adjusting to American life. They are skilled, educated and possess urban experience. Further, they enjoy refugee status and are therefore eligible for a variety of resettlement services, training programs, cash assistance and permanent resident status in the United States.

Finally, due to Soviet policy, the unit of immigration for these Jewish refugees is frequently an intact family (Simon 1985, Panish 1981, Jacobs and Frankel-Paul 1981).

Russian Jews are an elderly immigrant group. Their average age is 40.5 years, with 48% being over 45 years of age (Eckles et al. 1982, ORR 1986).[2] Family size for this population is very small — a recent study found that the average Jewish household from the former Soviet Union consists of three persons (Simon, 1983: 503). Very few emigre families have more than two children. The small family size makes for very close relations among family members. In contrast to American children, who are socialized by peer groups, these Jewish youth seem to be more involved with kin. The need for Russian Jews to insulate their children from anti-Semitism makes the family an institution of paramount importance. Relatives provide the young Jews with influence as well as emotional support. For example, an uncle may "pull strings" so that his nephew can gain admission to college.

Russian Jews are highly educated, having attended an average of 13.5 years of school — greater by one year than the average educational level of the U.S. population (Simon and Brooks 1983, Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 1984).[3] These high levels of education coupled with the fact that the Jewish women are accustomed to being employed outside the home, often in lucrative professional and technical occupations,[4] makes their family income substantial for a recently arrived immigrant group. A 1989 survey of Soviet Jews who had been in the United States at least eight years found their average family income to be $34,000 (Kosmin 1990, ORR 1984).[5]

The agency that resettles Russian Jewish refugees — HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) — is long established, well-funded and works in conjunction with other Jewish and public agencies such as Jewish Family Services, Jewish Vocational Services and Jewish Community Centers to offer a variety of services. These range from initial settlement, to job training and placement, social activities, religious socialization and mental health programs. Due to the efforts of these agencies, Russian Jewish immigrants are generally resettled in middle-class neighborhoods rather than the inner city enclaves that are the usual location of recently arrived immigrants (Rischin 1963, Gorelick 1982, ORR 1987, Eckles et al. 1982).[6]

The resettlement of the most recent wave of Russian Jews is facilitated by the communities of their earlier arriving countrymen (and women) who entered the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s. While some friction transpires between the two cohorts, the newly arrived take good advantage of the services, community activities and Russian-language infrastructure (stores, restaurants, doctors, religious programs, media) that prevail in major cities. Finally, because Russian Jews are resettled by American Jewish agencies, they are distributed among cities that already have sizable Jewish populations. These include New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston and San Francisco.

RUSSIAN JEWISH FAMILY ADAPTATION

Jews from the former Soviet Union share forms of family solidarity and support that are associated with their ethnic group (Wirth 1928: 141, Glazer and Moynihan 1963, Goldstein and Goldscheider 1968: 101-114, Gordon 1949: 189-208, Farber et al. 1988). At the same time, conditions of life in the U.S.S.R. further reinforced their family ties in unique ways. For example, due to the housing shortage in the U.S.S.R., it is common for extended families of three or four generations to reside together in very close quarters.

Their family orientation is indicated by their almost universal claim that their children's future was their main reason for leaving the Soviet Union.[7] Jewish parents stated that their desire to improve life chances for their children caused them to sacrifice their own relatively secure status and the easy retirement of their parents.

> *I probably decided to leave for my kids. Their future was not really obvious for me. Anti-Semitism is one point. And the second point is that I want my kids to be normal members of society, to be educated. And (in the Soviet Union) I don't think for them it's gonna be possible for them to get an education.*[8]

Another comment. . .

> *I have one kid — he is a very good guy — and as any normal parent, I am trying to make him an honest and good person. That's why we have kids. And in the Soviet Union, you can't make him completely honest because there is a double standard, double life, double talk, double meaning. . . .*
>
> *So me, like most of the people (from the Soviet Union) you are talking to, will give you as the main reason for immigration that they wanted to save their kids from that system.*[9]

Among Russian Jews, the extended family often provides means for successful adjustment to life in the United States as well as the motive for exit. Through extended families, refugees obtain a variety of resources — from their initial sponsorship in the United States (ORR 1987) to the necessities of daily life, to job referrals and the investment capital required to open a small business (Gold 1992, Simon 1985). Settled families provide support and advice to relatives recently arrived from the former U.S.S.R., Israel, Europe and other parts of North America. Through this family-based exchange of information, support and resources some of the social, economic and psychological trauma of the immigration experience is eased. Concurrently, the stability provided by this exchange allows refugee parents to fulfill some of their traditional responsibilities and, hence, offers the families continuity that might otherwise be unobtainable.

PROBLEMS THE JEWISH FAMILIES FACE

Despite their skills, education and family-based resources and their eligibility for resettlement services, some Jewish families from the former Soviet Union find it difficult to adapt to the United States. Problems they face include the dependency of the young and old, reversals of provider/recipient roles, status loss, and generational differences in religious identity.

DEPENDENT YOUTH

Because many of these Jewish parents achieve economic security with relative ease, they may not associate learning American customs with upward mobility as did many groups of proletarian or peasant immigrants who entered the United States at the turn of the century (Howe 1976, Lyman 1974, Thomas and Znaniecki 1920). Instead, such parents may be intolerant of their children's adoption of American customs and values. In their desire to protect children from alien influences, they may foster excessive dependence and prevent children from dealing with American life on their own terms (Aronowitz 1984, Hulewat 1981). A Russian Jew active in her community describes problems faced by the emigre adolescents and their parents' overprotective reactions:

> *You know, in Russia how it is so difficult for Jewish kids to go to university. I don't think it's easier here right now. The problem with the kids right now is that we have a lot of drop-outs.*
>
> *Some of the families are kind of supporting these drop-outs because the schools here are terrible. And some of our kids cannot get into the good program because they have a problem with language. They can hardly get into the gifted program or at least the above average program, so they are stuck with the mentally retarded program.*
>
> *And parents decide that it's better that the children not go to school. I know some of the families where the kids drop out of school and are working with the family business. And the parents decide if the kids want to get high school diploma, they will go to City College at night.*
>
> *They are not satisfied with the public education, and they cannot afford anything else, so they say — "don't bother with school, come to work with us."*

Refugee children often find it difficult to contend with high expectations for success. A resettlement worker comments that parents often realize that their children are under much more pressure than the native-born.

> *Having a child, whenever they see me with him, they give me advice. "He is too skinny." "He should have a hat." But yes, they admit, they look at the American*

children and see how relaxed they are. They say, "Our kids always cried and were always nervous and tense." And they said this was because "we were so tense and so crazy about them that we made them crazy."

She goes on to observe that due to pressures and problems in adjustment, many Russian Jewish adolescents have little in the way of a life of their own:

I have seen such cases of depressing loneliness in a 20-year-old boy or girl. It is easy if they live on the campus — that's a real chance to meet people. But many don't do it. They come and go to City College or a business school for a year.

They go to work and they live with their parents. If they don't have friends among other immigrants, it's unbelievable.

I know this one 22-year-old. She's beautiful, she's subtle. I think you would say she is a very intelligent young girl. She spends most of her time at work and then she spends time with her family. There is no outlet to go out because she doesn't know how to.

For some Russian Jewish children, especially daughters, even adulthood does not offer an opportunity for an independent existence.

My parents don't understand that I am an American now. Nobody lives with their parents after marriage. I want to have my own life.

Mother is constantly talking about living together in the future. I try to explain to her it's impossible. (Früchtbaum and Skager 1989: 14).

These quotes demonstrate that although strong ties yield benefits for emigre families, they also impose restrictions on emigre children and hinder their autonomous functioning.

REVERSAL OF BREADWINNER ROLES

Because wives and/or children may find employment more easily than fathers, Russian Jewish families sometimes experience a reversal of traditional "provider" and "recipient" roles. This transition is often less traumatic for Russian Jews than for other immigrant groups because Russian Jewish women are used to being employed outside of the home. Nevertheless, many of the women feel reluctant about abandoning elements of the feminine role to which they are accustomed. Paulina Furman, a resettlement worker and Jewish immigrant from Poland, describes the desire of women from the former U.S.S.R. to retain their femininity:

You see, I admire Russian women much more than I admire Russian men. They do heroic things. The keep the family together, they cook the goddamn dinners, they clean up. They do it here and they did it there. They keep the family stability

and the burden of immigration is on their shoulders. I even think that the women from Eastern Europe are tremendous.

The women are proud. They don't have this problem of the American women. There are two sides of it. On one hand they seem oppressed and exploited by the men. On the other hand, they feel very proud of being women and very proud of putting makeup on, and they are proud of putting pretty clothes on.

They don't have this ambiguity of American women who don't know who they are, boys or girls. They are proud of having their hand kissed and having a seat given to them on the bus. They can do both things, they really can.

Reversals of provider/recipient roles also affect refugee children who become breadwinners and/or translators and must take up adult responsibilities at an early age. Children who quickly learn English and job skills are more employable than their parents. This is especially so among recently educated Soviet youth — engineers, computer operators and the like — who have skills that are highly compatible with the American economy.[10] These young refugees become responsible for the emotional, social and economic needs of parents, grandparents and siblings. Young emigres frequently expressed displeasure toward their obligations. Many resented being deprived of the extended adolescence and consumption patterns which constitute major elements of the "California lifestyle." Some Russian Jewish youth reacted to their burden in "passive aggressive" ways — by spending little time at home, avoiding parents, refusing to eat mother's cooking or adopting liberal social and political values to which parents object.[11] As described below, others attempt to hasten their education so that they may acquire the income and independence compatible with their recently acquired family responsibilities.

STATUS LOSS

Ironically, the high levels of education and previous occupational prestige that are characteristic of Russian Jews cause some parents to be especially dependent upon their spouses or children (Simon 1985, Hulewat 1981). Because they had a prestigious occupation in the country of origin, they are reluctant to accept a less desirable job in the United States, and so remain unemployed. An emigre exemplifies this position:

In Moscow, I was chief civil-structural engineer. I used to make huge monoliths — tanks for the oil industry. I was the one who signed the plans for many big projects. I was the one who gave final approval. Here, I will do the same. I will work volunteer, I will study English, but I will be chief engineer.

Because of this man's refusal to accept less-than-desired work, great pressure was imposed upon his wife to support the family and upon his teen-age son to get good

grades and establish connections and prestige for the family within American society.

One way by which Russian Jewish families deal with problems of role reversals and status loss is through a "status leveling" process. Those who feel that they are at a disadvantage in social ranking will frequently bring into play information that discredits its apparently successful family members in order to make the situation more equal. This is illustrated by the reaction of the Waldman family to its most successful member "Igor." Igor, age 30, has a well-paid job as a mechanical engineer, has gone on several business trips and owns a new car as well as many other consumer goods. Further, Igor can speak English almost perfectly, masking his slight Russian accent with a false Western "twang." While occasionally commenting on Igor's accomplishments, his cousins, aunt and friends more frequently work to neutralize his achievements with mentions of his crazy driving, how much weight he has gained, his garish taste in music, clothes and entertainment and his enormous phone bill, bloated by calls to his girlfriend still in the U.S.S.R. At least within the family, this process of "status leveling" works to resolve some problems of status loss and role reversal.

DEPENDENT ELDERLY

Unlike most voluntary immigrant groups who are characterized by a youthful population (Simon 1986), many Jewish families from the former Soviet Union contain elderly individuals. Refugee families experience problems because the elderly have difficulties learning English, finding employment and making their way in the United States. Families who have successfully adapted to American life express concern over the relative isolation of their elderly relatives.

> *My mother is upset that she can't communicate with the kids and they are upset that she is forcing them to talk Russian because she couldn't do anything else. I have to translate at the dinner table when everyone talks in English and she says, "My own grandchildren, and I can't even talk to them. Maybe I made a mistake when I came here . . . "*
>
> *Back home, she was a doctor, she had a carcer. Here she is just another old woman who doesn't know English and she is not ready for this role at all. And nobody really needs her right now.*

As this quote suggests, a major source of family conflict involves the preservation of the native language. Immigrant children who seek acceptance in American society are often not interested in learning Russian. When children do not acquire the native language, they often become distant from symbols of ethnic belonging as well as their own relatives (most notably grandparents) who do not know English. A Soviet refugee comments:

I brought all my books and I can teach my son to speak and read Russian — but he doesn't want to speak Russian. We have a lot of problems at home. He doesn't understand too well because he was too small when we came, and he prefers English. And I want him to talk to his grandmother, but it's too hard, so we have some problems.

Another important factor in the development of conflict between the dependent aged and their families has to do with the relevance of parental advice. Parents and children alike recognize that the parents' experience of growing up in the Soviet Union provides few insights into the concerns of children who are living in California (Eisenstadt 1956). This problem is most severe among those families that include dependent parents, since their knowledge of and experience with American society is so limited. Precisely because the parents' attempts to find work and adjust to America have been unsuccessful, their advice may be rejected by children. A woman who had been a concert pianist in Odessa describes this experience:

Here I am free but I am still trapped because I lost my friends, lost my position, I lost my social status. You know it's a very difficult question. And another thing, kids grow up and they are different. You cannot share with them your experience. Because, a lot of people forgot what it was like when they were 15, but another side, they forgot even that when they were 15 they were in another society.

I cannot tell my daughter, "When I was 15" because she says, "When you were 15, you were in Russia." Not only generation gap, it's a gap of different culture.

While generational conflicts such as these are observable among all immigrant families (Eisenstadt 1956, Sluzki 1979), such problems are aggravated among highly skilled groups like Russian Jews. The unprecedented ability of certain emigres to adjust to America quickly widens the gaps in levels of adjustment that may exist within a single immigrant family. For example, Sasha, a 35-year-old Russian Jew, was making $30,000 a year as a computer programmer two years after his arrival in the United States. His position contrasted dramatically with that of his parents who knew almost no English, did not drive and were unemployed. Consequently, Sasha had to provide their economic support, translation and transportation in addition to managing his own career and family life. To offer the parents some independence, the family resided in a Russian-speaking neighborhood far from his job, thus requiring Sasha to make an 80-mile commute. He comments on the demands created by his dependent parents:

With my parents, it's not that they are just from a different country, they are from a different world. There are so many things they just don't understand. I have to take care of them. Father has problems with glaucoma, so he has to go to the hospital often. My younger brother, Boris, he just won't do anything for them, so it's all on me. But I have my own life, too.

GENERATIONAL VARIATION IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Another form of generational conflict experienced by Jewish families from the former Soviet Union involves religious identification. The three generations of Soviet emigres in the United States — the elderly, the middle-aged and the young — have each had a different experience with Judaism (Orbach 1980, Kochan 1978). The elderly are often well-versed in traditional Eastern European Judaism that they learned from their parents or before the Stalinist crackdowns of the 1930s. Middle-aged Soviet Jews grew up in an atheistic environment that encouraged the assimilation of Jews. Consequently, their experience of Judaism is secular. An engineer in his 40s describes his loss of Jewish knowledge:

> *No Jewish culture at all . . . you know our family lost it completely. It was a shame. When we went to Vienna, (after leaving the U.S.S.R.) they were kind of sorting people who the agencies would be taking care of. And they looked at our family — we didn't look like Jews to them. And they started to ask questions what we know about Jewish life. Do we know any holidays? And we were so ashamed — we didn't know any.*
>
> *Then I remembered. When I was a little kid, my grandfather gave us Hanukkah gold, Gelt. I recalled getting presents. And I told them about the Hanukkah Gelt — they started to laugh like crazy.*

Finally, emigre children who have spent a few years in the United States frequently have had some exposure to contemporary American Judaism, since numerous religious activities, scholarships to Jewish camps, schools and the like are made available as part of their resettlement program (Goldberg 1981).

Consequently, the meaning and experience of Jewish identity for each generation of Russian Jews is so different that it offers limited potential for family unification. It is paradoxical that Jews — religious refugees — are troubled by problems of religious unification. Markowitz (1988) describes how Jews from the former Soviet Union have created unifying rituals — such as Bar Mitzvahs held in Russian restaurants — that draw upon Jewish, Russian and American cultural imagery to make sense of their new identity.

RELATION TO AUTHORITY, SOVIET STYLE

Teachers, resettlement workers and other authority figures in the United States are often frustrated by the behavior of Russian Jews who are accustomed to dealing with authority figures and bureaucrats in the Russian style. In the Soviet Union, lower-level officials who deal with citizens are trapped between demanding clientele and powerful, upper-level bureaucrats. To ease some of this pressure, the system tolerates a high degree of flexibility and personalism in the delivery of services. Consequently, citizens

from the former Soviet Union are not immediately impressed by authority figures and expect their service providers to be susceptible to influence and negotiation.

Because Soviets understand authority relations in this manner, American teachers and resettlement staff who work with Russian Jews may find themselves treated as equals rather than superiors. For example, Russian Jewish students openly disagree with teachers or counselors, claim that their suggestions or assignments are "stupid," talk during class or "ditch" (skip class) when the feeling suits them. Advice may be ignored or compared to information from other sources. An ESL teacher described her Russian and Ukrainian students as acting arrogant and belligerent in class:

> *Some of my Russian kids are really obnoxious. They think the work I give them is "baby work" . . . that it's too easy. They act like I'm insulting them by expecting them to do the work, but they don't understand that I have reasons for giving them each lesson . . . they can still learn from the exercise.*

In response, many emigre students simply see such "baby work" as a waste of time and unworthy of serious attention.

> *I think the main problems is just (that we have) a higher level of knowledge. You don't want to go to the next period if you know what they're going to do there. And if it's just boring, people don't want to come.*

Finally, these Jewish emigres see rules as being subject to evasion. In the collectivist Soviet Union, individualism was not a key value, so copying or cheating on school work were not considered to be serious infractions.

Hence, Russian Jewish students and clients often appear aggressive, disrespectful or manipulative to American authority figures. However, emigres are generally warm, serious and cooperative students and clients. Their style does not indicate some deep-seated arrogance, but rather reflects their indifference to American-style displays of respect.

HOW JEWISH STUDENTS FROM THE FORMER U.S.S.R. ADAPT

Because of the unpredictable timing involved in exiting the former U.S.S.R., students may arrive in the United States during any part of the school year. Added to this are the age-grade discrepancies resulting from the structural incongruity between American and Russian educational systems. The net effect of both factors often yields adjustment difficulties for emigre students.

School-age Jewish emigres are generally a well-educated group who plan to attend college in the United States. However, because of their lack of English skills and knowledge about the American educational system, they experience frustration in attempting

to achieve their goals. Schools in the former U.S.S.R. are generally more rigorous and accelerated than their American counterparts, with students attending a 10-year (most recently 11) rather than 12-year system. Soviet students begin studying advanced subjects such as calculus and biology before Americans and, consequently, are years of ahead of Americans of the same age.

Because of the lack of structural congruency between the two educational systems, Russian students are frequently required to repeat earlier work. As the following quotes indicate, many emigre students find this to be destructive to the high levels of achievement motivation they initially bring to the United States.

> *Before I think, "Okay, I'm coming to America to study and not just to spend my time . . . it's not Russia anymore." But after one year I understand Russia is better in school. I was interested in studying, but here, the program for me is a little bit easy. The (American) program is like in Russian grade 5 or 6, so I know everything. Because the program is not interesting, people doesn't like school. They just ditch school. For what should they be going to school if they are not interested?*

> *The things I learn here in World History are 99.9% things I learned 5-6 years ago. I'm wasting my time, but I'm taking it easy . . . I just don't care about it. What can I do?*

Students' frustration is further compounded by the fact that their limited English ability prevents them from expressing themselves or demonstrating their advanced knowledge. In the words of one Los Angeles high school student: "I mean English difficult but work is easy . . . " Another commented:

> *I really want to go to university. I want to be doctor . . . but I think university should do something for immigrant people. Maybe I know more, but for English, I can't go to university.*

In addition to these school-based reasons for their discomfort with American attendance requirements, emigre students also confront pressures from their families. Because young immigrants generally learn the new language and culture more rapidly than their parents and grandparents, they are often saddled with major responsibilities for the social and economic care of the entire family. This, during a period of life when young people normally devote extensive time and energy to themselves. Hence, they feel great urgency to achieve economic independence such that familial responsibilities can be fulfilled while simultaneously maintaining a degree of personal autonomy.

Because emigres often experience their years in American high school as an unwarranted delay which prevents them from achieving preset life goals, some follow an alterna-

tive educational path. Having discovered that junior colleges will accept students without a diploma, they drop out to pursue what they see as the fast track to a college education. Some follow the correct procedures for withdrawal, while others simply stop coming to school. However, if their plans to obtain the A.A. degree are thwarted, such students find themselves lacking even basic English skills and a high school diploma and, accordingly, are faced with very few options for employment.

These actions of Jewish emigre students often appear irrational in the eyes of their American teachers and peers. However, it is important to recognize that given their own understanding of the American educational system, the former Soviets are taking what seems to be an active, appropriate and practical path to achieve the personal and familial goals that, to them, are most pressing.

CONCLUSIONS

Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union are highly skilled and generally enter the United States in intact, cooperative families. Further, they enjoy a very high quality of resettlement services. Consequently, their adaptation to the United States is often rapid. This is less true of the Pentecostal and Armenian emigres, who tend to have lower levels of education and fewer resettlement resources.

Russian Jewish families do, however, face problems in adapting to American society. These include status loss, dependency of the young and old, generational conflicts and difficulty in adjusting to American schools. In turn, these problems often yield differential adjustment to American life among family members. While certain emigres use their skills, education and resources to "make it" in American society, others — the aged, the young, those who are less skilled (or have nontransferable skills) and those who are less flexible — find coping with this culture to be much more difficult. Precisely because many Russian Jews do adapt rapidly, the difficulties encountered by others are worsened because they are regarded as the result of personal failure.

While the initial accomplishments of these emigre Jews are impressive, most have been in the United States for only about a decade. It will take many years before their general patterns of family adaptation become fully discernible.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

1. Because they were subjected to official ideologies in the former U.S.S.R., Russian Jews dislike formal lectures about appropriate attitudes, beliefs or behavior. They are more open to learning such lessons through example or their own experience.

2. As refugees, Jews from the former Soviet Union feel helpless. Hence, they welcome the opportunity to express their knowledge and opinions about various subjects. A trusting relationship between Americans and Soviet refugees can be facilitated by letting the emigres feel that they are competent and in control of certain interactions or situations.

3. Despite their status as refugees, Russian Jews do not hate the U.S.S.R. or even the former Soviet system. Rather, they tend to regard their country of origin with mixed feelings. Hence, anti-Russian or anti-communist comments may offend emigres.

4. Russian Jews are put at ease if you are able to converse about daily life in the former U.S.S.R. Hedrick Smith's very readable books, *The Russians* and *The New Russians*, offer many details about life in the former Soviet Union. Such anecdotes can provide a basis for conversations.

5. Emigres from the former Soviet Union may be prejudiced against minority groups. It is important for them to learn about the history and culture of American ethnic groups. Teachers might encourage a multiethnic group of students (say, an ESL class) to engage in an informal discussion of what it means to be an immigrant. In so doing, the differences between nationalities are de-emphasized, while commonalities are stressed.

6. Teachers who sense that their Russian Jewish students are losing interest need to make special efforts for communication, letting students know that their comments are heard. Teachers should explain their reasons for having students relearn some material so that the student does not feel that he/she is just wasting time.

Teachers should be flexible with their students from the former Soviet Union. The students generally want to learn, but easily become frustrated. Perhaps arrangements could be made to allow students who already know materials to occasionally do more challenging work or act as teaching assistants. If the students feel that the teacher is willing to work with them, they will be more patient and willing to work.

7. It would be very helpful for students from the former Soviet Union to discuss their career plans with an established emigre (perhaps a university student or recent college graduate) who could act as a role model and explain appropriate strategies for making their way through the American educational system. Local Jewish agencies such as the Jewish Family and Children's Service or Jewish Community Center might be able to refer such a person.

8. In recent years, thousands of Pentecostalists and Armenians have also left the U.S.S.R. Hence, it is incorrect to assume that all Soviet emigre students in the United States are of Jewish ethnicity. These non-Jewish emigres have different origins and experiences than Jews, and may require different support services from teachers.

NOTES

[1] In fiscal year 1990, 49,802 Soviet refugees (mostly Jews and Armenians) entered the United States, followed by 41,021 Vietnamese (refugees and Amerasians) and 8,719 Lao. (ORR 1991: p. 7).

[2] Soviet Jews, whose average age is 40.5, are 15 years older than the average immigrant who entered the United States 1970-1980 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1983: table 196).

[3] Russian Jews' education is exceeded by only one group of recent immigrants — Indians (Bureau of the Census, 1983: table 196).

[4] While only 3% of American women are engineers or technicians, 22% of former Soviet Jewish women in the United States were employed in these occupations in U.S.S.R. Further, a full 60% of these Jewish women emigres were professionally employed in the Soviet Union. In contrast, 16.5% of American women have professional occupations [1980 data] (Eckles et al., 1982:29, Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 1984: 415).

[5] As of 1981, refugee Soviet Jews' unemployment rate of 9.7% was only slightly higher than that of the U.S. population as a whole (Simon 1985, Statistical Abstract of the U.S., 1984). Further, 26% of time-eligible Soviet refugees are dependent upon cash or medical assistance. This is higher than the rate for Polish refugees (12%) and lower than that for Vietnamese refugees (64%) (ORR 1987: 34-35).

[6] Financial resources among Soviet Jews, however, are limited because the Soviet government prevents them from bringing assets with them.

[7] A 1981 survey of Soviet Jews throughout the United States (Simon and Simon 1985) found that ensuring a secure future for children was one of the major motives for emigration. Another study found that Soviet Jewish parents hoped their children would complete at least four years of college and find professional employment in the United States (Simon 1983).

[8] Since 1967, the number of Jews permitted to receive a university education in the Soviet Union has reduced by over 50%. In 1979, few if any Jews were admitted to Moscow University, the most prestigious Soviet institution of higher education (Jacobs 1981:7).

[9] This explanation for exit, while commonly expressed by Soviet Jews, is not universal. In the words of one emigre: "I don't believe and I don't trust people who say, `I left Russia only for the kids. . . .' It is first of all for yourself and only then for your kids."

[10] Young emigres were familiar with IBM computers and other American equipment acquired during the detente period prior to 1978. Hence they were immediately employable.

[11] For example, one Soviet Jew rebelled against his anti-Communist parents by adopting the political outlook of his liberal American classmates.

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